



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Confronting the socio-psychological environment: Feminist/political art protest in contemporary Russia from Pussy Riot to ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition

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Abstract: Issues related to psychological and environmental conditions are crucial for the analysis of contemporary activist art’s political impact. Russia is a patriarchal society, and the Orthodox Church is particularly powerful because of its close relations with the state. The paper provides detailed examples of the repression and censorship of feminism and political art. Due to the fact that there were — and still are — very few radical feminist political leaders, relatively young members of a punk rock protest art group Pussy Riot, established in 2011, and some of their supporters within the artistic field (such as Evgenia Maltceva, whose case is discussed in detail in this paper) have become the most thought-provoking (and undoubtedly, the most famous, especially in the West) feminist leaders in Russia. However, the socio-psychological environment is not supportive, mainly for historical and psychological reasons: my argument is that they are charismatic but disconnected leaders without followers, and therefore their impact on trends within Russian politics and society is quite limited.

Keywords: political art, feminist art, contemporary Russia, political censorship, state-society relations

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1. Introduction

For centuries, Russia has been a patriarchal society. The Church was particularly powerful because of its close relations with the state — and at the beginning of the 21st century the situation seems quite similar to that of two centuries ago. Traditionally, Russian censorship was stricter and more pervasive than in Western countries, and the situation was even more suppressive during the Soviet period.

Russian feminism began when Anna Filosofova (1837–1912), Nadezhda Stasova (1822–1895) and Maria Trubnikova (1835–1897) established the “Society for Cheap Lodging” in 1859, which offered

housing and help in childcare as well as sewing work for poor women. Later Filosofova and Stasova were among the founders of “Russian Women’s Mutual Philanthropic Society” which grew to be the most significant feminist organization of Tsarist Russia. It helped women to find employment, provided housing and healthcare and participated in the struggle for women’s suffrage. Anna Filosofova was active in the international women’s movement, becoming vice-president of the International Council of Women in 1899 (Aivazova, 1998). However, there were — and still are — very few radical feminist leaders either in Russia or in other post-Soviet states. In Russia, feminism has remained as a movement of a small commu-

Confronting the socio-psychological environment: Feminist/political art protest in contemporary Russia from Pussy Riot to ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition. © 2016 Alek D. Epstein. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

nity of experts and scientists and it has not become a societal movement that gathers extensive numbers of followers (Salmenniemi, 2014). Russian women often visibly wince at the word "feminism", which is filled with negative connotations, such as sloppiness, laziness, aggression, and vulgarity (Bruk, 2014).

Sexism and homophobia penetrate Russia's contemporary political arena. Pro-Kremlin and opposition activists alike are affected by and situated in entrenched understandings about gender (perceived masculinity and femininity) that they reproduce and challenge to varying degrees, as individuals and as organizations. Because both liberal and Pro-Kremlin organizations adopt ideas about gender in their activism in a fairly straightforward fashion (asserting their traditional masculinity and femininity and contending that their opponents' masculinity and femininity are deviant in some way), to a certain degree these political opponents are trapped in the same paradigm. Although their political positions sharply diverge, both sides use patriarchal culture in similar ways (Sperling, 2015). Feminism is a "very dangerous" phenomenon that "could lead to the destruction of Russia", Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church said in 2013 (Elder, 2013). Despite the current "hybrid war" between Russia and Ukraine, chauvinism and homophobia are dominant in the public space of Ukraine as well, and feminist and LGBTQ activists and artists in Kiev suffer from offensive aggression to the same extent as their fellow activists in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Epstein, 2014).

As mentioned by Kondakov (2012), "The reproduction of old practices of paternalist state control, lack of grassroots support for feminist activism, flourishing of official neo-traditional gendered discourses and disregard of academic gender research in which disagreement between gender researchers plays an important part which has become the reality of Russia in the mid-2000s. This may contribute to shaping protest and resistance practices, but meanwhile this situation serves to demotivate and discourage".

Relatively young members (such as Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, charismatic speaker of the group; she was born in 1989) of a punk rock protest art group Pussy Riot, established in 2011, have become probably the most famous feminist activists in the Russian public space. Pussy Riot see themselves as feminist artists, who have various musical, literary, and political influences, such as Riot Grrrl, Bikini Kill, etc. (McMichael, 2013), scholars such as Simone de

Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and many more. Pussy Riot's feminism focuses on the repression created by authoritarian regimes that create idealized ideas of sexism, sex and family life. Members of Pussy Riot, their supporters, as well as cultural analysts (Bernstein, 2013; Shevzov, 2014) have noted that Russia is a 'macho country' headed by a 'chauvinistic leader' and that the all-female art performance group fell prey to deeply ingrained gender discrimination. My first argument in this article is that Pussy Riot members and some of their followers within the artistic field (the case of Evgenia Maltceva will be discussed in detail) have become the most thought-provoking and radical (and undoubtedly, the most famous, especially in the West) feminist leaders in Russia.

Tavanti and Verhane (2013) mentioned that society no longer accepts a leader as merely an individual with charisma and knowledge and who leads or cajoles followers. Therefore, the demand for ethical leaders who are not merely part of a hierarchy is increasingly becoming a model for 'good' leadership. Authoritarian trends in Russian politics are quite obvious. A few years ago, the situation was somewhat different, and the authorities had to use various strategies in order to confront the dissent (Robertson, 2010), though the regime was described as "super-presidentialism" (Fish, 2005), but nowadays no one can compete with president Putin, whose status is much closer to that of a tsar than to that of an elected civil servant. Greene (2014) shows that at the center of the post-communist system in Russia, there is an institutional 'disconnection' between the power elite and the society; the latter is not inactive; it is made irrelevant because the elite designed a system that allows it to ignore the society. The absence of an influential political opposition is one of contemporary Russia's most serious problems, but within the grassroots civil society groups, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, there exists a demand for alternative leaders with another agenda, though not necessarily of another kind. Hundreds and thousands of people participated in various protest rallies against falsifications of the 2011 Russian legislative elections (Robertson, 2013; Greene, 2014); Nadezhda Tolokonnikova was among those who addressed the crowd on December 10, 2011, during Moscow's biggest demonstration since the fall of the Soviet Union. Theoretically, Pussy Riot activists, being faithful to their ideals and goals, and remaining disconnected

from a hierarchy, could occupy a prominent place in Russian public life, playing an important role in its extra-parliamentary opposition. No one among Putin's opponents and critics from Russia is as famous all over the Western world as Pussy Riot activists. However, my second argument is that they are charismatic but disconnected leaders without followers, and therefore their impact on trends within Russian politics and civil society is quite limited.

2. From Pussy Riot to the 'Spiritual Combat' Exhibition

Something completely unprecedented happened in the public space of Moscow on September 20th, 2012. One of the major centers of contemporary art was closed in broad daylight without any prior notice right when it was about to inaugurate a new exhibition organized by the prominent art ideologist Victor Bondarenko and the artist Evgenia Maltceva. The exhibition consisted of only eight paintings, but it triggered so much outrage and drew so many angry protesters that the art center managers had to call the police to restore order.

It all started on June 25, 2012 when the Moscow--based *The New Times* magazine published an interview with Victor Bondarenko and his collaborator, Roman Bagdasarov, an expert in cultural and religious studies. During the interview, they explained their purposes and aspirations:

Bondarenko: I have come up with a new artistic project. We have no intention to hurt anybody's feelings, we only want to convey a certain creative idea. We will present icons painted on wooden boards. And yes, there will be halos over the heads. ...actually, we are creating a new image of the Trinity.

– And what is the reason for painting a new Trinity?

Bagdasarov: The issue of religious images' place in art has come up again, and we think that those images need to be interpreted in a new way. We have no doubt that there is a need for a free and open-minded discussion soon on this issue. Our goal is to prove that contemporary artists have the right to work with sacred images(cited in Svetova and Yasina, 2012; translated from Russian by the author).

Do they really have such a right? It should be noted that some works based on religious motifs created by Russian painters Nikolai Ge (1831–1894) and Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), exhibited at the turn of the 19th and 20th century respectively, were forbidden by the authorities as blasphemous, and therefore, remov-

ed from exhibitions (Petrova, 2005). Later the Soviet Union was the first state to have, as an ideological objective, the elimination of religion and its replacement with universal atheism. In the words of Kowalewski (1980), "Massive state resources have been expended not only to prevent the implanting of religious belief in nonbelievers but also to eradicate 'prerevolutionary remnants' already existing. The regime is not merely passively committed to a godless polity but takes an aggressive stance of official forced atheization". State-imposed atheism ruled out any artistic experiments rooted in religious background in the officially recognized art in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Due to harsh censorship, before the years of Khrushchev's thaw very few artists in the USSR addressed biblical issues, although some of them still spent many prolific years exploring religious themes. Among them were Sergey Romanovich (1894–1968), David Sterenberg (1881–1948) and Pavel Korin (1892–1967). Naturally, they risked remaining completely unknown to the general public since their works on religious motifs did not stand a chance of being displayed at any exhibition. In the late 1950s, the spirit of liberalization and openness towards the Western world (at least in comparison to the years of Stalin's rule) caused a revival of interest in experiments within various unofficial art movements. Among the most significant painters who brought up religious issues were Vladimir Sterligov (1904–1973) in Saint-Petersburg and the Muscovite Oscar Rabin (who was forced to leave the Soviet Union and currently lives in France). During Brezhnev years Kowalewski (1980) discussed "the religious renaissance occurring in the Soviet Union". Though it seems to be an exaggeration, it is worth mentioning that in the 1970s and 1980s religious themes emerged both in the works of underground painters and of some officially recognized artists, such as Evsey Moiseenko (1916–1988), Andrei Mylnikov (1919–2012) and Ilya Glazunov.

However, surprisingly enough, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (the processes of democratization and liberalization that took place in Russia during the 1990s should not be underestimated) and especially after the resignation of Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin, opportunities to re-interpret and redefine the sacred space became more restricted.

Artists who encountered God through art even during the years of atheist propaganda either emigrated to Western countries or chose to enter the priesth-

ood (as, for example, Vladislav Provotorov, Sergey Simakov and Vitaly Linitsky), and even if they still continue to work as painters, their works can hardly be compared to what they used to create as nonconformist painters during the late Soviet years. On the other hand, some popular galleries, trendy art magazines and contemporary art centers developed a strong negative attitude towards the Russian Orthodox Church, if not to religion, in general. The Russian Orthodox Church has come to be viewed as a completely rotten, deceitful, cynical and corrupt institution that nevertheless claims some ideological and moral authority without any justifiable reasons. The development of independent art exploring religious images has almost come to an end, and the whole sphere of 'the sacred' has fallen under the authority of religious institutions, and especially of the Russian Orthodox Church.

That is exactly what the 'Spiritual Combat' exhibition organizers tried to speak against. Bondarenko summed up the goal as clearly as possible: "In our day, all the attempts to imitate the 17th century visual images look like Christmas tree decorations... If you want to create a 17th century church, you have to be a 17th century person, you have to think and to feel the way your century requires ... it is time for today's artists to paint new icons for our contemporaries" (personal communication, July 2012).

The exhibition inauguration was scheduled for Thursday, September 20th, 2012. On Monday, September 17th, 2012, *The New Times* magazine published my article about it, as well as two comments offered by guest experts; four paintings, created by Evgenia Maltceva, were also reproduced. Two days later, the article and the pictures were put up on the journal's website and immediately caused an enormous scandal. The article in the journal was entitled 'Icons for Pussy Riot'. One of the artworks intended for the exhibition was an image of the Trinity based on the likenesses of the young women from the Pussy Riot art-band who had been arrested: Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich. However, this work was not reproduced in the journal.

In this work, Maltceva refers to the most emblematic Pussy Riot performance, the one that took place in Moscow's most famous cathedral. On February 21, 2012, as part of a protest movement against the re-election of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president de

facto for a fourth term, five women from the art-band entered the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

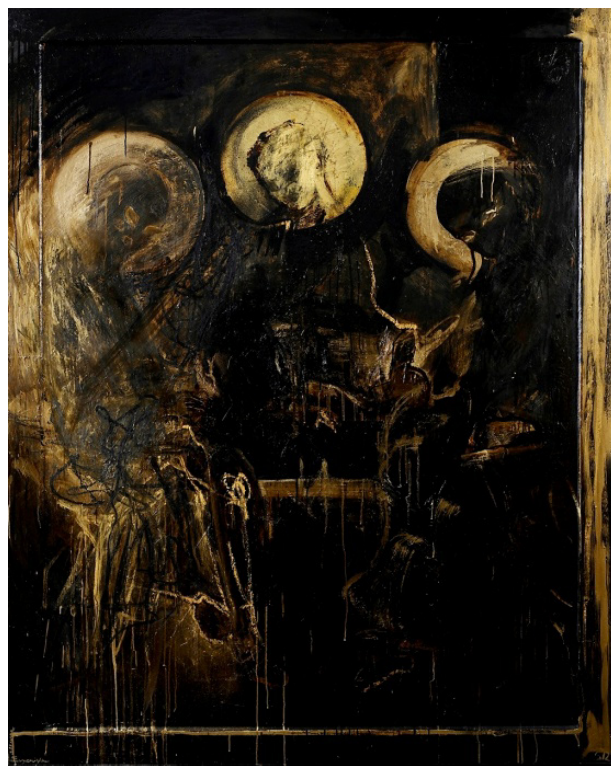


Figure 1. Evgenia Maltceva, *The Trinity*, 2012. Victor Bondarenko Collection.

This cathedral occupies a unique place in Russian spiritual history. Initially erected to celebrate Russia's victory over Napoleon, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is an iconic building, whose nineteenth-century construction glorified the unity of the state, the Orthodox religion, and the people. Stalin ordered the destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was detonated on December 5, 1931. This barbarous act symbolized the victory of the communist ideology over the Orthodox Christianity. The rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was presented by the authorities as a symbol of national spiritual renaissance and an act of historical restitution for the sins of the Soviet regime against the Orthodox Church (Haskins, 2009).

3. Pussy Riot Performances

Removing their winter clothes, the Pussy Riot members put on colorful balaclavas, walked up the steps leading to the altar, and started to jump around, punching the air. Less than a minute later, they were

escorted out of the building by the guards. A short quasi-documentary film of the performance was later combined with footage shot at a different church, the Epiphany Cathedral in Yelokhovo (Pussy Riot activists visited it on February 19, 2012), to create a video clip for the song that was a mix of punk-rock riffs and traditional Orthodox chant, which they entitled ‘Punk Prayer: Mother of God, drive Putin away’. Since the Pussy Riot activists’ arrest on March 5, 2012, this art-band has become a symbol of radical opposition towards Putin’s regime and the clericalization of Russian public life.

Curiously enough, out of the five performances by this art-band during its four months of activity, from November 2011, to February 2012, only the last one, which took place at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, featured some anti-clerical elements. The other performances were staged and videotaped on trolley bus roofs, in the Moscow underground, on garage roofs in front of temporary detention centers and even in fancy boutiques; on January 20, 2012, early in the morning, the group even managed to perform at the Lobnoye Mesto, a historic site on Red Square. The Lobnoye Mesto is a 13-meter-long stone platform situated in front of Saint Basil’s Cathedral. Its name is derived from the Russian words for ‘forehead’ (lob) and ‘place’ (mesto). The platform, which is believed to have been constructed in brick in the 1530s, was first mentioned in 1547. Subsequently, it was primarily used for an-

nouncing the tsar’s decrees and for religious ceremonies.

None of Pussy Riot’s performances contained any anti-Christian ideas or spoke against any other religion. As mentioned by Shevzov (2014), the power of the performance as *iconoclash* (the term ‘iconoclash’, as employed by French philosopher Bruno Latour, refers to acts where there is uncertainty regarding intent and meaning of a seemingly straightforward iconoclastic gesture; Latour, 2002) resulted from the fact that it tapped, resonated with and disturbed Russia’s orthodox culture through its appropriation of orthodox sound, space and symbols — namely, the image of Mary, the mother of God. Paradoxically enough, only these very people who did not utter a single word against Christianity or any other religion became symbols of atheism and blasphemy. The Pussy Riot members admitted that they did not have any anti-religious motives: “We respect religion as an inseparable part of culture. Also, there are Orthodox Christians among Pussy Riot members” (Zagvozdina, 2012). Their protest was aimed rather against the collaboration between governmental repressive institutions and the Church (“Black robe, golden epaulettes, all parishioners crawl to bow”, “the head of the KGB, their chief saint, is conveying protesters to jail”), as well as against the clericalization of education (“a teacher-preacher will meet you at school, so go to class and bring him money!”).



Figure 2. Pussy Riot activists performing at the Lobnoye Mesto near the Red Square, Moscow, January 20, 2012.

During their performance at the Lobnoye Mesto, the Pussy Riot activists brought up those issues by creating an alternative image of the Virgin based on civic activism ideas, in contrast to the conventional image of the Madonna of humility, typical of the late middle age and the renaissance. The song, performed by a relatively large group of Pussy Riot activists on Red Square, mentioned both the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene—the Gospel references describe her as a courageous servant leader, brave enough to stand by Jesus in his hours of suffering, death and beyond (she was present at Jesus's two most important moments: the crucifixion and the resurrection):

"Madonna in Glory will teach us how to fight
The feminist Mary Magdalene went to the demonstration"

(cited in Pussy Riot Group blog, 2012a)

Punk Prayer 'Mother of God, Drive Putin Away' also included a clear feminist message:

"Virgin Mary, Mother of God, become a feminist
Become a feminist, become a feminist"

(cited in Pussy Riot Group blog, 2012b)

Six months later, in her closing statement at the court, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova explained the group's intentions and aspirations:

"What Pussy Riot does is oppositional art or politics that draws upon the forms art has established. In any event, it is a form of civil action in circumstances where basic human rights, civil and political freedoms are suppressed by the corporate state system. We were looking for authentic genuineness and simplicity and we found them in our punk performances. Passion, openness and naivety are superior to hypocrisy, cunning and a contrived decency that conceals crimes. The state's leaders stand with saintly expressions in church, but their sins are far greater than ours. We've put on our political punk concerts because the Russian state system is dominated by rigidity, closeness and caste. And the policies pursued serve only narrow corporate interests to the extent that even the air of Russia makes us ill" (Tolokonnikova, 2012).

Russian clericals were not ready to put up with a Trinity inspired by women who conveyed such ideas. The very same day that the article in *The New Times* was published on the magazine's web-site, an activist from the Saint Prophet Daniil's Missionary center, Dmitry Tsorionov, circulated the following message among his comrades:

"Brothers and sisters, tomorrow at 6 p.m. blasphemers want to inaugurate an exhibition that defiles the sacred images of the Savior and the Holiest Trinity by portraying them in masks as described in the post below [it was followed by a link to my article in The New Times magazine]. In order not to allow that, we need each and everyone's help. It will only take you a couple of minutes to make your own contribution; for further details, send me a personal message. Those of you who want to confront the organizer of the sacrilegious act himself, let us know.

P.S. Who could lend us an [oil] canister?" (unpublished original document).

A declaration published by the Eurasian Youth Union on September 20, stated:

"Using pseudospiritual and pseudoscientific terminology as a fig-leaf, the so called 'contemporary artists' manage to get away with real Satanism (sic!). ... They propose to extol the feminist blasphemers and call the paintings with deliberately deformed images 'icons'. Thus, we observe an indisputable falsification: the term 'icon' is used to denote some kind of actual anti-icon, a dark morose picture resembling a mask. The appearance of those 'anti-icons' is nothing but another offensive made by the demonic powers in their war against our church and our society. Anti-christ and blasphemers, those are the new icons of the new religion propagated by liberals, contemporary artists and the West" (Eurasian Youth Union, 2012).

After blaming everything on liberals and the West, the Eurasian Youth Union's speakers called upon "all Russian patriots to speak out against this event and show that such things are completely unacceptable".

This obsession with 'the West' is a phenomenon of its own kind. As mentioned by the leading Russian anthropologist of sexual culture Igor Kon (1995), the Russian character, lifestyle, and mentality are often represented as a realm dominated by spiritual values (*dukhovnost*), in sharp contrast to Western materialism, pragmatism, and fleshliness (*telesnost*).

This ideology of disembodied spirituality, with a corresponding underestimation and denigration of the body and its physiological functions, is most clearly shown in Russian Orthodox religious art. Russian orthodox icon painting, when done according to the Byzantine canon, is much stricter and more ascetic than Western art. Secular nude painting also appeared much later in Russia, and was under more stringent social control than in the West (Kon, 1995).

4. Intertwining of Art and Religion

Art and religion have a long intertwined history of subject matter, conceptualization, representation, patronage, and use. In the words of Hecht and Ekstrom (2001), “Religion is always tradition bound, locked to religious institutions. Spiritual art is free-floating and combinatory, beyond tradition and institution, and manifests the artist’s freedom to go beyond the norms of theology and the religious normative”. When it comes to the images of the Trinity and the Virgin Mary in art, it is important to point out that a secularized interpretation of iconographic images goes all the way back to works by Western artists of the late 19th and early 20th century. For example, the painting ‘Madonna’ (1894) by Edvard Munch (1863–1944) shows a naked young woman with ecstatically closed eyes and loose black hair; and the only thing left from the canonic Madonna is the halo over her head. Atle Næss (2004), the author of Edvard Munch’s best published biography ever, mentions that in order to stress that it is all about the moment of conception, Munch added two fetus-like figures at one side of the woman and easily recognizable spermatozooids by the other. (In a better known version of this work — altogether there are five of them — there is only one fetus, while the spermatozooids make the frame of the whole lithograph).

Another famous artist, Max Ernst (1891–1976), created a painting entitled ‘The Virgin spanking the Christ child before three witnesses’ (1926, Museum Ludwig, Cologne). At first glance, one can immediately see the drastic change in the pose of this familiar religious duo; this is no ordinary painting of the Virgin and Christ child. Gone is the angelic facade, Christ’s halo has fallen to the floor and he receives a spanking for his misdeed. This disrespectful and blasphemous treatment of two central figures of the Catholic Church was typical of the Dada movement and Surrealism, and caused much scandal. Max Ernst painted the Madonna and child in a way no one had ever painted them before: his work was based on the well-known image of Venus punishing Cupid.

Overall, images of the Virgin Mary based upon outstanding real-life personalities are quite common. For instance, the model for Munch’s ‘Madonna’ was Dagny Juel Przybyszewska (1867–1901), while the renowned work by the French photographers Pierre Comoy and Gilles Blanchard entitled ‘La Madone au coeur blessé’ (‘Madonna with a Pierced Heart’,

1991, collection of François Pinault) portrays Lio, the French pop-singer and actress of Portuguese descent.

In 1990 famous French artists Pierre and Gilles created the work ‘Legend’ portraying the pop music queen Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone, known simply by her first name Madonna. All throughout her career Madonna has used religious images and symbols. For example, in 1989 she performed the song and recorded a disc entitled ‘Like a Prayer’. The music video for ‘Like a Prayer’ was a lightning rod for religious controversy, using Catholic iconography such as stigmata and burning crosses, and a dream about making love to a saint. It was said that the video for ‘Like a Prayer’ could be “read as an indictment of a white male patriarchal Christianity in the name of what has happened to ‘white’ women and to Black men”. In response to the controversial music video, the Vatican condemned the video. Critics accused it of sacrilege and heresy. However, ‘Like a Prayer’ became an international success; worldwide, the album has sold over 15 million copies. A ‘Rolling Stone’ magazine columnist described the album “as close to art as pop music gets”. Madonna still continues using interpretations of religious images and rituals. For example, in 2006, during her concert in Moscow she appeared crucified in the song ‘Live to tell’.

Clearly, the image of the Virgin Mary as well as other images rooted in Christianity (and in other religions, too) have worked their way into secular art and inspired many artists, including those whose works have nothing in common with traditional iconography. However Russian Orthodoxy has always had its own attitude towards iconography and visual interpretations of biblical subjects, which is very different to Western church concepts. The changing standards about what is acceptable and what is not in contemporary Russian society bring back obsolete forms and canons that disappeared as early as in the first half of the 19th century. The works by Evgenia Maltceva are now rejected as blasphemous just like the paintings by Natalia Goncharova some hundred years ago.

5. Radical Feminism and Gender Conflicts in Russia

Feminist issues are a key element both in the performances by Pussy Riot and in the ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition. Pussy Riot members constantly promoted the so-called third-wave feminist ideology, as well as

LGBTQ rights. They sang and spoke about it, and some of them even participated in civic protest actions along with LGBTQ groups and their supporters. The Pussy Riot members probably became the first renowned Russian civic activists who draw their inspiration from writings of Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Gross. There exists many female NGOs in Russia, but ideologically a vast majority of them has almost nothing in common with radical feminism. As it was mentioned by Pushkareva (2006), who chairs the Gender Studies Group at the eminent Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography in Moscow, "the term feminism and its derivatives were associated in public consciousness with something negative, politicized, ideological, brought in from the West and unnecessary for Russia". In this regards the situation has not been changed drastically. Russian feminist intellectuals, especially Anna Temkina, Elena Zdravomyslova and their colleagues from the gender studies programme at the European University in St. Petersburg, and sociologists Elena Omelchenko, Elena Rozhdestvenskaya and their colleagues from the High School of Economics, should not be forgotten, but their public impact is very limited and almost none of them could be described as an influential opinion maker or a popular media figure. Several non-conformist Russian artists contributed their works for the exhibition and the art book, published in order to support the Pussy Riot members during their trials (Epstein, 2012), but almost all of them addressed either relations between the church and the state in Putin's Russia or to the artists' right to free self-expression. Feminist issues were extremely rare even in this regard. Probably Victoria Lomasko, Lusine Janyan and a person who calls herself Umnaya Masha (Clever Masha) are the only radical feminist artists in contemporary Russia.

As mentioned by Shevzov (2014), "Punk Prayer infringed on the historically male-dominated sphere of church-state relations. While powerful women might be found in the annals of Russia's political and cultural history, their numbers among the governing institutional echelons of the Russian Orthodox Church historically have been virtually non-existent". With its episcopal ranks filled with male monastics and with its ordination to the priesthood closed to women, the Russian Orthodox Church's public theological and political voice in post-soviet society remains overwhelmingly male, despite the fact that the public face

of lived, devotional orthodoxy is predominantly female.

Pussy Riot's video clip 'Mother of God, drive Putin away' includes a song containing the line 'Gay-pride sent to Siberia in chains'. Fortunately, it is just a metaphor, although an attempt to organize a gay pride in Moscow in 2011 (Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Yekaterina Samutsevich both participated in that rally) resulted in a violent police crackdown, just like all other similar initiatives. It is no surprise that nationalist vandals greeted the 'Spiritual Combat' chanting, "All the liberals and Pussy Riot fans, get the hell out of here marching as a gay pride! There is no place for them in Russia. Russia is not for faggots! We're meeting at 18.00 at the Vinzavod Center".



Figure 3. Pussy Riot members at the feminist and LGBTQ rally, Moscow, December 24, 2011. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (right) and Yekaterina Samutsevich (left) hold their slogan "Free women".

The fact that Evgenia Maltceva is a young woman, herself plays a huge role, as well. For a woman, it is much harder to earn the recognized right to participate in the re-interpretation of the sacred discourse. Art history is dominated by men, and almost all women,

including the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, were portrayed almost exclusively by male artists. Visitors of great museums encounter very few female artists, and those among them, who were not afraid to create unconventional images of Christ, are even fewer. The only such woman in the history of Russian art was Natalia Goncharova (regarding an importance of gender themes in her artwork—Parton, 2010), who created the cycle entitled “Twelve Religious Compositions” in 1909–1910, and a cycle of Biblical paintings in 1910–1912 — those are believed to be sketches for frescoes in some church, though it is not clear which one; anyway, this project was not completed and not realized (Petrova, 2005). Even nowadays the number of female artists who take the liberty to work with sacred images remains scarce; one can recall only a few contemporary artworks of this kind created by women, such as ‘Premonition’ by Cheryl Kline and ‘Jesus is dying for my sins’ by Jessine Hein.

6. The ‘Spiritual Combat’ Exhibition

As the ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition was ready to open, some one hundred nationalists, orthodox activists and so-called Kazaks arrived at the Guelman Gallery, followed by photo correspondents. They tried to force their way into the building. Out of fear of attacks, provocations and vandalism, Victor Bondarenko demanded that visitors be allowed in by invitation only, and as a result, none of those who were enticed by announcements and advertisements in mass media and arrived at the art center could get in. Furthermore, the managers of Vinzavod Center for Contemporary Art decided to close the premises and not to let anybody in without first discussing with the exhibition organizers. Bondarenko and his staff members urged the managers to reopen the art center, but failed. The exhibition was open to the public for two weeks, and there probably was not even a single quiet day. The art center received daily phone calls about explosive devices allegedly planted in the premises, and each time the staff and visitors had to evacuate. On October 1, Evgenia Maltceva was summoned by the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for ‘incitement of religious enmity’ (article 282 of The Criminal Code of The Russian Federation). She arrived at the investigator’s office along with Victor Bondarenko who was interrogated as well. The same day the so-called ‘Orthodox activists’ and the Kazaks announced a new

demonstration against the exhibition, and the art center stayed closed for several hours out of fear of new outbreaks of violence on October 2, 2012.

Eventually, the Vinzavod management succumbed to the pressure and demanded that the ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition be closed, giving some acceptable excuse. Three days later, on October 5, all of Maltceva’s paintings were taken away from the gallery. No artworks displayed at the ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition have been shown anywhere else in Moscow in the past seven months. The arrest of the Pussy Riot members for their ‘punk-prayer’ at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior revealed that anticlerical action within the religious sphere in contemporary Russia is perceived as completely illegitimate. Marat Guelman, the celebrated gallery owner and art critic, who previously supported artists condemned by the Orthodox Church, wrote that the punk-prayer was “offensive and inappropriate”, as it was done in a “sacred” space, as opposed to the “profane” space of a gallery (Guelman, 2012). Indeed, all of the artists previously condemned by the church had performed in galleries and museums. However, the fate of the ‘Spiritual Combat’ exhibition, that took place in Marat Guelman’s gallery at the Vinzavod Center for Contemporary Art, showed that such events could not be held anywhere at all, including contemporary art galleries, which no one sees as sacred places.

It was not the first case of its kind in Russia’s recent history. On July 12, 2010, a crowd gathered outside the Taganskii court in central Moscow (I was there the same day as well). Men in black army boots and fur hats wielded large crosses and moved in a solemn procession around the courthouse, while women in headscarves prayed quietly nearby. A man clothed in all black with a long white beard and holding a large, ornate cross in front of him gave an interview to a TV journalist, “They offended Russian Orthodoxy and Christ. We demand that they be punished”. Inside the courthouse, the final hearings of an art trial that had been stirring popular debate over the previous two years were coming to a close. The exhibit that launched the complaint, *Forbidden Art 2006*, consisted of works of art that had been rejected from various other exhibitions for reasons of censorship. The artworks included an image of Christ in a McDonald’s advertisement and an icon of the virgin made of black caviar, both by Alexander Kosolapov, as well as an image of crucifixion of Jesus with

Lenin's head by the late Vagrich Bakhchanyan. The main purpose of the exhibit, however, was not to shock, but to attract attention to issues of censorship, including self-censorship. Claiming that the show offended religious and national sensibilities, the ultranationalist Orthodox group *Narodnyi Sobor* (People's Assembly) filed criminal charges against the two curators, Yuri Samodurov and Andrei Erofeyev. Only a small minority wholeheartedly stood behind the Forbidden Art project and its curators (Bernstein, 2014).

When asked about Pussy Riot, President Putin stated that they threatened the "moral health of our society", and therefore needed to be punished. "It is not allowed to endanger the moral basis of society and to destroy the country. What will remain of us then?" Most liberal commentators understood this as an official proclamation that offending the Russian Orthodox Church equaled an offence to the Russian state, as the ruling *Edinaya Rossiya* [United Russia] party had on more than one occasion proclaimed that Russian Orthodoxy should become the "moral basis" of society (Bernstein, 2013).

7. The Struggle for Freedom of Expression in Feminist Art

When it comes to the sphere of religion in Russian art, the struggle for the freedom of interpretation and self-expression is just as hard as it was back in the days of Tsarist censorship. Putin's Russia is just another example of a concordat: the authorities grant the religious institutions various privileges in exchange for their support, therefore enjoying not only civil, but also sacral legitimacy. This concordat is of crucial importance for both sides involved in it, and, by restricting various civil liberties, they do not perceive the right of an artist's self-expression as something valuable enough to be protected.

The struggle for the freedom of art, as well as for the feminist values, in Russia is far from being over. In her brilliant paper on the Pussy Riot affair Bernstein (2013) mentions, "Despite the calls of those who warned that the women should not be turned into martyrs, their punishment ended up acquiring a distinctly sacrificial character". A smorgasbord of new legislation, informally known as the Pussy Riot laws, have been put into place in Russia to clamp down on the group and anyone who might try to imitate their art protests. The law against 'offending religious feel-

ings' adopted by the Russian parliament at the end of June, 2013, created a new legal reality, and all public galleries and museums are aware of it, therefore excluding works of art, that could be perceived as 'provocative', from their exhibitions. Pussy Riot's website was blocked, civil rights activists were persecuted for making T-shirts with their images, and videos of four of their impromptu concerts were declared extremist, meaning that it is illegal to possess them in Russia. At the end of December, 2013, a Russian-British documentary film by Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin titled *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* was banned from being released at the Moscow Gogol Art Center. The directors of the Gogol Center, a state-financed theatre, received a call from the authorities threatening their jobs if they screened the documentary. A letter from the Moscow governmental department of culture, formally banning the screening, followed (Kirill Serebrennikov, Gogol Center's artistic director, republished this letter at his Facebook page). The letter accused the artists and filmmakers involved of being provocateurs, and said their brand of culture had no place in a government building. The cancellation follows two other scuttled screenings in Moscow; both were also called off at the last minute (Ryzik, 2013). The film was not broadcasted in any public cinema or art center in Russia.

"There are two reasons why we frighten people", says one of the Pussy Riot activists. "The first thing is that we're a feminist, female group with no men connected to it, and the second is that we don't have leaders. These two aspects, of the structure that has no leaders and their emphasis on women, are strongly connected. Russia has always linked the idea of leadership with some man or other, who can control things, and control women. A woman's group with no leaders... this activism comes from a place people do not recognize, and sets itself up against the structures of power" (Penny, 2013). However, it seems that this struggle without leaders did not succeed in mobilizing followers, the activists have been remaining alone in the battleground. In fact, they do have leaders — as a group, they are the leaders, who do their best to become opinion-makers as well.

Three years passed since three Pussy Riot activists were arrested in March 2012 (Samutsevich was released on October 10, 2012, and Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina on December 23, 2013), but still very few

individuals in Russia share their feminist and political values, which have been perceived as too radical even by those who defended them after their imprisonment. Ruth Rosen wrote a book entitled 'How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America'; it will probably take few decades or even more before it would become possible to publish such a book about Russia.

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